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ABSTRACT

A practicum was designed to improve and expand the writing skills of 13 fifth-grade students placed in an upper elementary school Alternative Education program. The major goal was to provide the students with the means to improve their written output and grammar. Secondary goals were to help the children to think logically about the writing tasks and to enhance student self-images. Students were trained to use the computer and word processor and engaged in such prewriting activities as discussion, determining the main idea and subordinate details, and judging for whom the composition would be written. They kept a daily journal to which the teacher responded in a nonjudgmental manner, and the word processor was used almost daily to improve writing and student attitudes. An informal writing checklist was utilized to determine if writing skills improved. Analysis of the data revealed that the students benefitted from using a word processor in the following ways: they were able to write logically and coherently on a given topic; it was easier for them to see and correct mistakes; written output increased; they expressed their feelings in their written work; writing exercises seemed to provide an emotional release which lessened inappropriate behaviors; student use of adjectives and adverbs showed increases; spelling improved; and in some instances, capitalization improved. Classwork and homework were returned promptly. (Four tables of data are included. Appendixes include a dictated paragraph, checklist for informal evaluation of writing, first dictation and final dictation samples, a letter of permission to use the informal checklist, a key to symbols denoting writing errors, and three writing samples. Thirty references are attached.) (Author/MG)

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Improving the Written Communication Skills of Upper Elementary Alternative Education Students by Using a Word Processor

by

Susan E. Black

Cluster XXX

A Practicum I Report presented to the
E.D. Program in Early and Middle Childhood
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

CS212402

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Approved:

September 20, 1989
Date of Final Approval of Report

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Improving the Written Communication Skills of Upper Elementary Alternative Education Students by Using a Word Processor. Black, Susan E., 1989: Practicum Report, Nova University, Ed.D. Program in Early and Middle Childhood. Descriptors: Alternative Education/Learning Disabilities/Emotionally Handicapped Education/Delinquency/Elementary Education/ Computers/Word Processing

This practicum was designed to improve and expand the writing skills of students placed in an upper elementary school Alternative Education program. The major goal was to provide the students with the means to improve their written output and grammar. A secondary goal was to enable the children to think logically about the writing tasks presented to them, and to organize those thoughts in a coherent manner. A tertiary goal was to enhance student self-images by expressing themselves in writing.

The students were trained to use the computer and a word processor. They engaged in such prewriting activities as discussion, determining the main idea and subordinate details, and judging for whom the composition would be written. They also kept a daily journal to which the writer responded in a nonjudgmental manner. The word processor was used on an almost daily basis to improve writing and student attitudes. An informal writing checklist was utilized to determine if writing skills improved.

Analysis of the data revealed that the students benefitted from using a word processor. They were able to write logically and coherently on a given topic. It was easier for the students to see and correct mistakes. Written output increased. The children expressed their feelings in their written work. The writing exercises seemed to provide an emotional release which lessened inappropriate behaviors. Student use of adjectives and adverbs showed increases, although minor. Spelling improved, and in some instances, capitalization. Student behavior and work changed for the better. Classwork and homework, hitherto not forthcoming, were returned promptly.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Work Setting and Community

The writer taught in an elementary school in a low income area of the southeastern United States. The school population was about 97% Black and 3% Hispanic. Among these two groups were recent immigrants from Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, and other countries of the Caribbean basin.

The neighborhood itself, was rampant with drugs and other aspects of lawlessness including car theft, assaults, and other crimes against individuals and personal property. Some students, as young as eight years of age were already engaged as lookouts for local drug dealers.

Many families were headed by single women in an extended family setting. Many children were living with grandparents, usually grandmothers who serve as the nurturers and decision makers for their children and grandchildren. Dawson (1981) has stated that children from a one-parent household were likely to have a lower level of socio-emotional development concomitant with lower academic achievement. This is especially true for many lower class children.

Households were highly transient. Teenage pregnancies were quite common. The problem is one of national concern. The impact of teenage pregnancies works against the child, the child's mother and the educational process.

Housing consisted of predominantly single family dwellings with pockets of low-rise multiple dwellings. As the neighborhood deteriorated, necessary businesses such as supermarkets, gas stations, and cleaners departed. One section comprising shabby tenements nestled by the railroad tracks was dubbed, "The Front" by the police. It received this dubious title because of the incidence of violence and shootings on that street.

The area was originally developed as a white, middle class neighborhood. In the course of time, the inner city with its attendant problems gradually engulfed the community, and it slid into a socioeconomic decline.

Writer's Work Setting and Role

The academic environment in which this practicum took place encompassed a program which the local education authority entitled "Alternative Education." It was a dropout prevention program geared to aiding those students who because of behavior and low academic achievement may not complete high school. The program consisted of mixed age groups and grade levels - fourth, fifth and sixth grades, with an age range of ten to thirteen. At the end of the school year, five girls and four boys were enrolled in this program.

The children came to school emotionally hardened, with a plethora of disadvantages - economic, social, academic and physical. Alcohol, drug abuse, violence within the family, teen-age pregnancies, unemployment and child abuse wreaked havoc with their lives.

Prior to placement in the alternative education program, the majority of these students were in the Federally mandated and funded Chapter I program. In this school district, Chapter I placement ended with the fourth grade.

Enrollment in this class was based on homeroom teacher documentation of a learning/behavioral problem or a combination of both. Low academic achievement also correlated with disruptive classroom behavior. The parents or guardians of these children were notified of the "child study team" meeting. The meeting's purpose was to discuss the child's behavioral and academic problems. The referring teacher, the alternative education teacher, the school counselor and the assistant principal would discuss placing the child in the alternative program. The parent agreed to placement by signing the appropriate form. The child's status in the program was reviewed every nine weeks (each grading period).

If there was a significant improvement in work and behavior, the child was permitted to return to his or her referring homeroom for a trial period of two weeks. If the placement proved satisfactory to the referring teacher and beneficial to the child, the placement would then remain permanent.

These children had very poor self-images, and in most cases, little success in school. There was a stigma attached to placement in the alternative class.

The teacher's role was to modify student behavior so that the students could function at a socially acceptable level.

It was expected that their ability to perform academically would improve.

Standardized tests showed that these students were functioning more than one to two years below grade level in reading, writing and mathematics.

A maximum of fifteen students could be placed in this class. Enrollment fluctuated from a high of thirteen children to a low of nine. One part-time aide was assigned to this section.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Students enrolled in an upper elementary school alternative education program had exhibited poor academic progress in all subject areas in their respective homeroom classes. Their writing skills were of great concern to their referring teachers. Most notable was their inability to grasp the fundamentals of language mechanics. Inadequate written communication skills were a handicap to the student and a portent that they might face extensive future academic and vocational disadvantages.

In addition to a poor understanding of English grammar, these students produced insufficient composition content. Many students had enormous difficulty in composing a simple sentence.

The children assigned to this class were in grades four through six. They exhibited specific characteristics which might indicate that they were potential dropouts. Specific indicators were: lack of academic progress, high absenteeism and aggressive behavior.

The boys were quite belligerent as were some of the girls. They engaged in numerous acts of vandalism. One girl openly encouraged her classmates to rebel against their teacher. A boy had been apprehended by the police for assaulting an

elderly woman. Others had participated in robberies. Most were openly contemptuous of their referring teachers and defiantly hostile to any authority.

The majority of students had been enrolled in Chapter I classes from grades one through four. The ratio of students per teacher in Chapter I had been fourteen to one in grades one through three, and sixteen to one in grade four. In grade five, these students were confronted with a thirty plus ratio of student to teacher. Indeed, many of the behavior problems that were exhibited in their homerooms were not evidenced while they were in Chapter I.

Academic progress, which was made very slowly, and behavior, had deteriorated. These students may have experienced great difficulty in adjusting to learning in a large class. In addition, Chapter I may not have allocated sufficient time to the very basic skill of writing. The school district also emphasized specific time allotments per subject area.

The children's written production was inadequate. Their written language skills were not commensurate with their grade and age levels. They were unable to organize their thoughts in a coherent manner. This hindered their ability to write about a given topic.

It was difficult to gain the trust of this group. Positive reinforcement was the hallmark of working with these children. Concentrated lessons in basic skills and individualized instruction had to be employed.

The problem: Insufficient prior learning coupled with poor behavior, little motivation, and low interest impeded these students' ability to write creatively and coherently.

Problem Documentation

The alternative education students' homeroom teachers showed consternation over their scanty written output. It was difficult for them to extract simple, intelligible sentences from the children. Frequently, in spite of prewriting activities, the students would write disjointedly on a subject which had nothing to do with the topic. They would jot down a few words and inquire if a sentence or two was sufficient.

The teachers also declared that accompanying low written output were exceedingly poor grammar skills. These students also appeared to lack basic skills in spelling, sentence and paragraph construction. An inability to spell made it difficult for some children to use a dictionary.

A survey given to staff members indicated that some teachers believed that deficient writing skills derived from a lack of prewriting activities in previous grades. A few teachers felt that past writing instruction was also insufficient.

All respondents felt that poor writing ability impacted detrimentally on these students' self-esteem as well as affecting other curricula areas.

Yearly standardized testing showed that the alternative education students scored far below the 40th percentile in the critical curricula areas of reading, writing and mathematics.

The lowest percentile rating in writing skills was the 5th percentile. Their written language abilities were very low. Their homeroom teachers declared that these children were unable to utilize the required English test because of their inability to understand the concepts.

A test of minimum basic skills showed that the majority of these students could not write a paragraph, express their ideas clearly, compose grammatically correct sentences, spell, punctuate and capitalize properly. They were unable to complete information on such common forms as library cards which require name and address, etc.. They lacked the ability to do simple library research.

When writing a dictated paragraph, certain students could not spell such basic Dolch words as "does" and "wear." These children evinced confusion over capitalization, verb construction and when to use singular and plural nouns. Punctuation was a source of bewilderment, although the teacher's dictation informed the children where to place the proper marks. Indeed, three students declared that they could not take the dictation at all, and ceased writing (see Appendix A).

Their behavior disrupted the classroom routine and was frequently combative toward fellow students and teachers alike. According to Redl and Wineman (1957), the students' egos were decidedly out of phase with their social environment, and supported their aberrant behaviors. Their deportment and attitudes prevented them from completing their

tasks, writing included. Writing was a chore to be dispensed with as rapidly as possible.

Causative Analysis

Teachers blamed parents for students' poor writing abilities and conduct. Parents would not attend conferences when asked to do so. They changed home phone numbers, gave the school erroneous phone numbers and disconnected home phones without notice. Families would move without informing the teacher or the school. When contacted by the teachers about their children's poor work and deportment, the parents would declare that they would speak to their children so that school work and behavior would improve. Usually, there was no improvement. Conduct was still unacceptable, and homework and classwork were not forthcoming.

A few teachers mentioned that these children's families did not contain a caring and significant male figure. The families were headed by women, frequently grandmothers. Research has found that students from such one-parent households have a higher incidence of discipline problems, tardiness, skipping school and transience at both the elementary and secondary school levels (Dawson, 1981).

Ilg, Ames and Baker (1981) believe that the parents of children who have little or no ability to restrain and modify their impulses need to be firm and in control of the home environment. Parents have to direct their children toward expending much of their pent-up energy in educational activities.

Some teachers cited a belief that previous instruction did not include sound methodology in teaching writing skills. Referring teachers concluded that poor student work habits and writing were caused by a lack of parental involvement with the schools. Uneducated parents were unable to help their children with academics. Teachers also blamed poor preschool and early childhood academic preparation, as well as peer pressure from a high crime, low socioeconomic area.

Other teachers also stated that parental lack of education results in parent's inability to conceive of their educational importance to their children. Parents did not understand that they were a vital link in the school-learner-education chain. Studies indicate that Black children will succeed in school when their parents frequently contact that institution, demonstrate that they value education, regularly monitor school work and reinforce same ("Parents as Partners," 1988).

Large classes were mentioned by teachers as a factor which hampers learning. Some learners experienced greater difficulty with class size than others.

The kindergarten program in this school was geared to academics rather than play. Highly structured classes were the norm. Many children might be better prepared for reading and writing if they first had the opportunity to learn via play situations.

The main thrust of the language arts program was the basal reader. Creative writing, was often a once a week, half hour to hour activity. This may not have been sufficient time to

foster good written communication skills.

Before young children learn to write, they need to engage in oral language activities which will enable them to express their ideas in a creative fashion, such as: dramatics, puppetry, choral reading (Norton, 1985). Students often lack good listening skills. Oral language instruction is not utilized frequently enough to boost prewriting activities.

Children may have had inadequate instruction in the all important prewriting tasks of topic selection, sharing of ideas, and discussion. This hinders student ability to clarify and solidify their thinking on how to write about a specific topic (Norton, 1985). This is one of the causes for deficiencies in student writing skills.

Insufficient or ineffective use of teacher dialogue may hamper some children when they attempt to crystallize their thoughts about composing (Englert & Raphael, 1988). Some teachers may have neglected to inquire of their students answers to such simple questions as - "Who and why am I writing this for?"; and, "What do I know about my topic?" This helps students structure their thinking about their concepts.

Students may not have been granted adequate opportunities to write or encouraged to write daily on student selected topics without teacher criticism (Englert & Raphael, 1988). They may have not been afforded the chance to keep a log or journal in which they can jot down their thoughts about the day (Gersten, 1988). The scarcity of such activities

increases the likelihood that the students will incur writing difficulties.

Without daily writing practice, children can not improve the quantity and quality of their written communication.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

A debate in methodology concerning the teaching of English composition is taking place. Literary sources cite various factors which result in a dearth of student writing abilities.

Some researchers note that very little training is done using Fernald's VAKT approach (cited in Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988). This technique uses stimulation of the visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile senses to innervate learning (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988). Strong modalities may have to recompense for weaker ones.

Alternative education children do not qualify for learning disabilities classes. Their referring teachers may not have had training in teaching learning disabled students. These techniques would aid them when instructing these children (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988).

Many teachers may not know the principles of behavior modification. These children are not emotionally handicapped but could profit from the motivators that this program uses. Positive reinforcement could provide a modus operandi for improving the learning environment.

An observation in current literature notes that the emphasis in English classes is on reading rather than writing (Moran, 1988). Instruction in the writing process needs to

grow from small units such as clauses, to combining clauses, and then to the end result - the paragraph.

When composition is taught, the emphasis is placed on grammar rather than prewriting activities. Children also need a good deal of oral language practice in the early childhood years.

According to Norton (1985), in order for children's linguistic development to proceed, students require sufficient opportunities to engage in oral language activities in the primary grades. With the stress on reading, the time spent on oral language development in the early childhood school years has diminished.

Before writing compositions, children must understand the purpose of the composition. They must recognize its relation to the prospective audience/s. They need to know the parts of a composition, the importance of the main idea and supporting details. The students need to produce a coherent sentence, and develop a paragraph (Norton, 1985). Unless the child has a grasp of these fundamentals, he or she can hardly be expected to write in an organized and creative fashion.

Poor writing skills can also have as a root cause a deficiency in vocabulary development. If a child enjoys reading, he or she will expand the vocabulary. A poor reader will not enjoy reading and consequently will not experience vocabulary growth. This predicament in turn impacts upon writing skills (Norton, 1985).

As a cause of limited vocabulary development, Norton

(1985) also cites a lack of adequate intellectual stimulation and a chance for practice. Frequently it is the home that does not provide the necessary motivation.

Teachers often direct much of the written language activities. This is also detrimental to student acquisition of writing skills.

The writing lesson's emphasis is placed on the product rather than the process. There is little opportunity to write daily or engage in prewriting activities such as discussing the topic with the entire group. Knudson (1988) reported on a California elementary school study whose data indicated that when teachers acted as facilitators rather than as directors of the writing lesson, students produced superior writing.

Poor writers are hampered by their inability to organize thoughts and data in a coherent manner in order to write. Ideas leap from their minds to paper without any apparent planning. The end result - their work reads in a very haphazard manner. One study recommended an approach called the "process approach to writing" which is characterized by daily writing, student selected topics, and group editing and revising of work (Englert & Raphael, 1988).

Hickerson (1987) indicates that research over the decade has supported the view that students need to be taught how to analyze text structure. Emphasis is placed on pattern and order as it relates to enumeration, time, comparison, and cause and effect. They also need a clear understanding of what a paragraph is. This should enable students to organize

information and ideas in a logical manner.

Some teachers have been remiss in not utilizing techniques such as sentence completion, lead sentences (A square is ____, e.g.), rewording sentences, word banks (incorporating a specific number or words in sentences and paragraphs), and debriefing (listing important facts). These techniques are used in reading but not in writing (Azzolino, 1988).

Liebman and Barrell (1988) have stated that we do not encourage children to ask their own questions, discover their own problems, and derive solutions. The lack of these strategies contributes to poorly organized thought processes which inhibit the writing process.

Researchers allude to the fact that some teachers may not adequately evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their students. This may be particularly so when it relates to minority students. A teacher's expectations of student performance can have an extremely powerful effect on a child. A caring, yet demanding teacher can produce positive educational results (Vasquez, 1988).

Teachers should also clearly formulate in which ways they are going to assess student writing. Isaacson (1988) states that the teacher can analyze individual strengths and weaknesses by using a checklist (frequently holistic in that composition and its subskills are not separable); analytic scales (yielding ratings or descriptions corresponding to cogent written text features); or atomistic (precise countable measures of a single writing element). Educators, for too

long have relied on standardized tests to measure written language skills (Isaacson, 1988).

Hawisher (1988a, 1988b) has noted that one method of increasing student motivation in writing is by using the word processor. Technology may provide some helpful answers.

The literature has delineated many possible approaches to the dilemma of poor written communication skills. The forces creating the problem are many and varied.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The major thrust of this practicum was to increase the written communication skills of the alternative education students by the end of a three month period. A secondary goal was to train the children to logically organize their thoughts for written communication. A tertiary, but no less important goal was to heighten the students' sense of self worth and moderate disruptive classroom behaviors. It was anticipated that there would be an overall improvement in the students' grasp of the mechanics of the English language as well.

The primary vehicle to achieve these ends was a simple word processing program.

Behavioral Objectives

It was hoped that the students would display the following written language and behavioral improvements:

1. Increase in written output as measured by the mean of a word count per every four compositions.

2. Increase in percentage of words spelled correctly on weekly compositions and spelling tests with 80% mastery.

3. Capitalize where required on weekly writing exercises with 80% mastery as measured by a teacher check of the work.

4. Use correct verb tenses in weekly writing assignments as measured by a teacher check of the work.

5. Increase in the students' ability to organize the main idea and subordinate details relating to a weekly writing topic into a logical sequence evaluated on an informal writing checklist.

6. Increase in the students' sense of self worth as evidenced by improvement in student attitudes and behaviors and recorded by teacher observation.

Measurement of Objectives

To ascertain the level of the students' writing ability at the initial stage of implementation, a simple paragraph composed by the teacher was dictated to the children. They took the dictation by first using pen and paper, and then typed the same sample on the computer.

This paragraph was dictated to the students at the end of the project in the same manner (see Appendix A). The aforementioned was done in order to judge the degree and amount of pre and post technical errors that the students made in a dictated sample.

As each student was measured independently of his or her peers for an increase in written output, words per composition per student were counted, and a mean calculated for each student every six compositions.

Thus, it was hoped, that the differences in intelligence between students would not become a critical factor.

The same procedure was used to determine the number of adjectives and adverbs used per composition and for spelling tests.

An informal checklist for the evaluation of writing, developed by Norton (1985), was used to assess student writing ability (see Appendix B). This checklist is a holistic evaluation of writing. It specifies particular features in the writing sample, and requires each feature to be scored separately. As each statement can be answered yes or no, this checklist is also a dichotomous scale (Cooper & Odell, 1977). The informal checklist was also utilized to ascertain if the students planned and organized their concepts preparatory to writing. These are indicators of writing maturity (Cooper & Greenbaum, 1986).

Teacher observations were also used to informally measure any signs of improvement in behavior.

Mechanism for Recording Unexpected Events

A computer time sheet was kept to track each student's time spent working with the word processor. Also noted were any changes in attitude, motivation and behavior. Any unusual spurts in writing ability were recorded.

Description of Plans for Analyzing Results

Data were synthesized in tables consisting of: written output, the number of adjectives and adverbs used by the student, and their scores on spelling tests. A mean for these domains was calculated at four week intervals.

Logical composition construction, evidenced by the organization of the written material into the main idea and subordinate details was noted on the writing checklist.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Possible Solutions

Many researchers agree that poor writers experience difficulty in generating ideas and in organizing those ideas into meaningful phrases (Englert & Raphael, 1988; Knudson, 1988; Moran, 1988). To improve student writing, these same researchers have pointed out that teaching strategies which provide daily writing experiences, using student selected topics, group-sharing opportunities, and peer-revision during editing are beneficial.

Another approach is one called "schema" building. Students are taught such common text structures as narration, composing and contrasting, with problem formulation and solutions. This technique has enhanced students' composition abilities (Moran, 1988).

Knudson (1988) has suggested that when writing lessons are less teacher directed, the result has been a gain in student writing output, grammar and vocabulary.

When using word processors, current research affirms that it does improve student attitudes toward the writing process (Hawisher, 1988a, 1988b; Kane, 1983; MacArthur, 1988).

Word processing (or the use of the computer) seems to act

as a writing stimulus. Children appear to spend more time at the computer composing, and more adept class members aid those students who are less skilled in utilizing the program. The teacher assumes the role of a guide in this activity and the writing process, overall, becomes less threatening to the children.

Word processing also provides the added stimulus of easy screen revision. The students do not have to rewrite the entire paper. They can obtain a rapid printed copy (hardcopy) via the printer (Hocking & Visniesky, 1983). This holds true even though computers are thought of by students as educational and in general, difficult to master. Children consider working on computers a desirable asset. Writing, in this study was not deemed educational or a preferred activity (Krendl, 1985).

Studies have indicated that the word processing activity seemed to instill a certain degree of collaboration and camaraderie to student writing projects which aided the development of language skills (Hawisher, 1988b; Tone & Winchester, 1988).

Computers can free the student from the physical barrier of writing by hand as well as the psychological one of having to complete a writing chore. Using a word processor builds confidence (Fluegelman & Hewes, 1983). All editing is done on the screen. The student has a clean copy with which to work.

Isaacson (1988) points out that neophyte writers are poor in those areas previously described in this work, but also

display a lack of understanding of the audience they were writing for and overly concerned with the mechanics of writing. The word processor might alleviate this situation. In addition, Coburn, et al. (1982) has declared that using a word processor encourages students to write with greater output and detail, and as an added result, often expands the students' ability to follow directions.

Description of Selected Solution

Extra time working with computers had been utilized as a reward in behavior modification for these students. Therefore the writer decided to continue to use the computer in conjunction with the "FrEdWriter" word processing program for the Apple IIe, IIc and IIgs family of computers. The students were enthusiastic over using the machines and did not view word processing as a threat. Indeed the Apples were a source of motivation to the children. They were ever anxious to use them. Rescinding computer privileges always elicited improved behavior.

The children immediately saw the advantages to using a word processor over handwriting compositions. This occurred when the printer was out of service for one day and they had to pen their written work. They recognized that any corrections necessitated rewriting the entire paper even if only one correction was required. They were relieved that the printer was again on line the following day.

"FrEdWriter" is a very simple, public domain word processor. It has a typical menu which offers the user such

choices as a "HELP" section, creating program copies, viewing the disk catalog, deleting files and starting the program.

The screen following the main menu presents a secondary menu where the user may select a 40 or 80 column monitor display.

The control key is utilized with specific alphanumeric keys to perform necessary functions. For example, depressing the "CONTROL" and "L" keys at the same time provides the user with the "LOAD" function. Typing the name of the file causes the computer to move that particular information from disk to the computer's memory. Pressing "CONTROL" and "P" allows the contents of memory to be output to the printer. Pressing "CONTROL" and "S" plus naming the file commands the computer to save the current information in memory on the disk. None of these commands proved difficult for the students to master.

This program does not contain a speller/thesaurus. Therefore, the students had to use dictionaries if they could not spell a word.

The children evinced frequent mistakes when they attempted to find words in dictionaries at the initiation of this study. This necessitated teacher intervention and caused student frustrations. As time progressed, they mastered the rules for making a dictionary search and therefore, required less teacher assistance. However, help needed to be provided to some students, although at a reduced level.

Two or three, half hour sessions were enough to familiarize all students with the various program functions:

SAVE, LOAD, PRINT, erase memory, tabulate, etc.. No students were adept typists, but none evinced any typing difficulties.

Researchers agree that word processors change the physical process of writing. The student types and then revises on the screen. Spelling changes, insertions and deletions of words, sentences and paragraphs, and movement of text are rendered with ease (MacArthur, 1988). The high visibility of student text on the monitor makes the written work easily accessible to peers and teacher thus facilitating collaboration (MacArthur, 1988). Written work is shared in a social context.

Word processing can augment the writing program since students do not have to recopy the entire text in revision. This may enable the children to view writing as an avenue by which they can freely express themselves without becoming bogged down with the mechanics of writing (Baer, 1988).

It is obvious that instruction to the student must be provided on collaborative writing to ensure that the session is fruitful. Proper deportment and sharing of work responsibilities need to be observed and explained by the teacher. The activity must be accompanied by sound instructional practices and a knowledge of student abilities and learning styles (Hawisher, 1988b; Kane, 1983; MacArthur, 1988).

Report of Action Taken

Throughout this study, students engaged in ample prewriting activities. They discussed the topic with the

teacher and "brainstormed" with their peers concerning the writing assignment.

Initially, the teacher modeled the type of questions the students should inquire of themselves and others when developing needed ideas in preparation for writing. They had to ask themselves why they were writing the composition, who their intended audience was, and what was the central theme or main idea of their writing, among others.

Many of the writing topics were gleaned from the district's "Character Education" curriculum which emphasizes the development of personal values through free and open discussion of current values; conflicts that might emerge from these values; and the consequences of an individual's actions.

As a part of their daily reading/writing activities, the children were asked to state the main idea of a paragraph as well as to name its subordinate detail or details.

The students, however, remained far better at detecting the main idea and accompanying details in preprinted matter rather than in their own written endeavors.

During the period of this study (12 weeks), the above-mentioned activities were ongoing.

The children also kept a daily handwritten journal on any topic or concern that they desired. If they wanted to, they could show their entry to the teacher for her response. The teacher's response was nonjudgmental as to grammar, spelling and other aspects of language mechanics. She would only reply to the particular student concern as written in the journal.

If the student did not wish the teacher to read a particular passage, the student would fold the page in half in order to maintain his or her privacy. This activity was conducted daily for the remainder of the study.

Beginning with the second week of the study, the "FrEdWriter" wordprocessing program for the Apple II family of computers was introduced. The main menu with its choices of selecting the 80 - column versus 40 - column screen width display was discussed. Other choices which the students did not have to be concerned with were also discussed. The 80 - column screen display had to be selected for a normal page width on both the monitor from the printer.

The major command for saving, loading, printing or for the "HELP" were executed by using the combination of the CONTROL key <CTRL> in combination with other keys. For example, LOAD was CONTROL <CTRL> - <L>; SAVE, CONTROL <CTRL> - <S>; PRINT, CONTROL <CTRL> - <P>; and "HELP" was CONTROL <CTRL> - <T>. When the CONTROL key was pressed in conjunction with these other keys, the desired command was executed.

The above sequence was so simple, that within 2 sessions, no child evinced any difficulties with program commands.

Nor did the children have any difficulty with the printer as all they needed to be concerned with was the placement of the on/off switch, and the selection keys for selecting the printer, form or line feed.

To stimulate and provide practice in concept development for composition, the students were placed in two groups of

five and four children respectively. Each group was given the words: who, what, when, where and how. Each student was in charge of one word (he or she chose the word they wanted) and had to develop a logical idea or sentence based on that word. Each sentence, when combined with the others had to make a complete paragraph or story (Suffolk County Board of Cooperative Educational Services 2, 1987). This activity was performed at least two more times as the children usually required more than one exposure to an exercise.

Students were presented with pictures and required to write a composition with the word processor based on what they believed the pictures represented. They also entitled them.

Two unsuccessful attempts were made to set up proofreading teams wherein the student author as well as the proofreader would receive a grade (Suffolk County Board of Cooperative Educational Services 2, 1987). The positions of author and proofreader would switch.

The failure of this activity was possibly due to the fact that elementary school children are not skilled enough in language mechanics to perform at this sophisticated a level.

To encourage thinking and writing skills, the teacher would provide the beginning and ending sentences to an uncomposed story, and the students, using the word processor would compose the middle.

This exercise posed problems for the students. To perform the activity, it was necessary for them to work in teams of two. On an individual writing level, they froze. A lack of

confidence in their own abilities to be creative may have elicited this response.

Students were also required to work in groups of two to three students and write a short composition on a theme of their choosing on the word processor. As a writing team, they had to name, save, edit and load their program. They then had to display their composition for the class on the monitor and print hardcopy. The hardcopy was then xeroxed so that each student received a copy of the work (Hunter, 1983).

Throughout this study, the students were challenged to create their own stories and titles. It must be noted that these children preferred having the title presented to them rather than each one having to produce their own. Originality requires more thinking than when one is formula fed a tailor-made idea.

Weekly spelling words were culled from the student's readers.

The "FrEdWriter" wordprocessing program was used as the vehicle to enhance student written communication skills and as a by-product, to improve their self-images.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

This study's results supported the supposition that utilizing a word processor with alternative education students would enhance writing skills.

Spelling scores achieved for the first two months of this study were low. However, as seen in Table 1, these grades showed improvement in the final month.

Table 1

Spelling Scores and Mean

	First 4 Weeks		Third 4 Weeks				
Student	Week 1	X	Week 1	2	3	4	X
A	88	77	100	abs	68	100	89
Al	56	60	100	76	abs	72	82
D	60	61	84	52	100	64	74
E	52	47	68	100	abs	100	72
F	84	64	60	100	69	100	72
J	100	87	100	84	88	100	93
K	60	79	100	88	100	68	89
L	36	66	76	84	52	100	78
Ll	100	78	64	96	76	100	84

Note. Only the score for Week 1 of the first month is shown. The mean is for that entire period.

Capitalization, in some cases was not practiced on a regular basis by the children. Other students, however, did adhere to the rules for capitalizing in written text (see Appendices G, H, and I). In the final phase of the study, capitalization, overall, did show improvement.

Grammar, i.e., using the correct verb tense and punctuation did not indicate any substantive increase in student mastery . (see Appendices G, H, and I).

Written output varied. It was greater in the first four weeks of this study than in the second four weeks. It showed a decided increase in the third, and final four weeks as shown in Table 2.

Adjectives per composition also followed the same pattern as written output (see Table 3). However, there was not that large a gain in the number used in the study's final month.

The number of adverbs used when writing was inconsistent. Table 4, shows that some students increased their use of adverbs.

It was noted on the checklist that students were able to utilize the main idea and subordinate details to write about a particular theme. The children grouped and structured their ideas. The composition's purpose influenced the writing, and ideas were organized into logical and discernible sequences (see Appendices G, H and I).

Behavior showed positive gains. Attitude, self-concept and work habits indicated greater improvement. This latter observation was evidenced by improved school work and pride

Table 2

Word Count and Mean

	First 4 Weeks		Third 4 Weeks							
Student	Composition		Composition							
	1	$\bar{X}$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	$\bar{X}$
A	68	83.67	67	100	199	408	abs	113	128	169.16
Al	22	29.00	47	36	52	49	75	58	74	55.86
D	16	34.60	28	32	35	45	23	44	57	37.71
E	38	56.50	111	47	abs	216	abs	95	61	106.00
F	43	38.25	83	64	abs	71	75	74	73	73.33
J	15	39.83	47	38	92	79	40	42	63	57.29
K	36	42.00	105	62	65	69	43	71	58	67.57
L	34	20.00	43	29	39	34	27	58	83	44.71
Ll	44	42.33	46	39	59	99	53	51	62	58.43

Note. Only Composition 1 is shown for the first month.
The mean is for that entire period.

Table 3

Adjective Count and Mean

Student	First 4 Weeks		Third 4 Weeks							
	Composition		Composition							
	1	$\bar{X}$	1	2	3	4	5	5	7	$\bar{X}$
A	5	5.50	4	5	9	13	abs	0	8	6.50
Al	1	2.00	1	3	0	3	1	2	3	1.86
D	0	.80	0	1	1	2	2	2	4	1.71
E	3	2.16	0	2	abs	1	abs	4	2	1.50
F	0	1.00	2	0	abs	1	0	3	2	1.33
J	0	3.00	2	3	9	2	3	4	6	4.14
K	0	2.80	2	3	4	2	3	1	1	2.29
L	1	0.50	3	1	2	1	3	5	8	3.29
Ll	0	1.67	1	1	2	6	1	2	2	2.14

Note. Only Composition 1 is shown for the first month.
The mean is for that entire period.

Table 4

Adverb Count and Mean

Student	First 4 Weeks		Third 4 Weeks							
	Composition		Composition							
	1	$\bar{X}$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	$\bar{X}$
A	4	2.83	2	10	9	10	abs	5	5	6.83
Al	0	1.00	5	2	1	2	1	2	0	2.17
D	3	2.00	4	3	2	3	0	5	2	2.71
E	1	2.83	0	3	abs	3	abs	2	3	2.20
F	3	1.80	6	1	abs	1	0	4	3	2.50
J	0	1.00	1	1	6	1	0	1	2	1.71
K	3	2.00	4	3	1	3	0	2	1	2.00
L	2	1.00	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	.86
Ll	3	1.50	2	0	0	0	0	8	0	1.43

Note. Only Composition 1 is shown for the first month.
The mean is for that entire period.

in the production of written output.

For example, one boy did little class or homework for the first two months of the study. In the final month, he took great pains in completing classwork and returning his homework.

Another child made sure that his parent signed all his work whether class or homework. Before the beginning of this study it had been necessary to call this child's home to remind the parent to sign her son's homework. If this procedure was not followed, no homework would be done.

Two girls, who had consistently failed their spelling tests began to pass them. They did not always achieve grades of 100% nor did they pass each week. However, there was a distinct improvement in those scores by the study's end.

For most of the school year, one boy did not complete his class assignments. He also failed to return his homework on a regular basis. Suddenly, halfway through the study he began to make sure that all his classwork was completed. All homework assignments were given to his teacher the next day and signed by his parent.

Written output showed the greatest gains and seemed to act as a therapeutic release for these students' inner turmoils. It also seemed to lessen unacceptable classroom behaviors. The very act of writing about what they were feeling enabled them to shed pent-up emotions.

At the beginning of this study written output was sparse. Students were anxious to complete it as expeditiously as

possible.

In the initial phase of this study, one girl tersely described a fight that she could not avoid thusly: "I was playing school. She hit me in the face and I punch her. She start to cry. and my mom came in. and she told us to stop it and come out of the room" [all student work is reproduced as written].

While one understands what this youngster is saying, grammar is very poor and written output is low.

Toward the end of the implementation period this child decided to describe her feelings concerning a long and important district wide test:

> I do not like tests because you can not say a word. And we can't have P.E. [physical education] and Music and Computer. And I don't like that. I like tests but I do not like to miss P.E. Sometimes you can't sit a long time. And you won't to get some water, the teacher say no. I want to go to the sixth grade. I do not want to stay in fifth another year.

This student has displayed a solid improvement in output and in the ability to organize her material so that she can make a coherent statement. She has also shown an improvement in grammar.

One boy initially tended to write short and upbeat compositions. It was as if he had to gloss over his true feelings. When he wrote about himself he declared, " I can be excellent when I want to. But I sometimes try to hard to

make friends. But when I grow up I'm going to be in the Olympic Games. I'm going to be a great star in the Olympics."

This student was one of better than average ability who by the end of the study began to express his true emotions:

> One of the things that bothers me is when someone picks on me and never says anything nice to me and says all kinds of things about my grandmother. And always mention my flaws just as if they don't have any of them.
>
> I try not to say anything. But it is very hard not to. But I have to or I will get in trouble and I will get written up and it will go into the computer and it will be there for life. If I try to apply for a job I might get turned down because of my record. If they go check my record and see that I have a bad temper they will make me lose my job.

This child was able to freely express his fears for himself in an honest fashion. He also increased his written output.

Another boy would refuse to write and at the beginning of this three month study begrudgingly produced this small composition : "Win my mom came to school she was glad. She saw my taeher [teacher]. And my taeher give her good news. sometime I am bad and sometime I am good."

At the end of the study he wrote:

> I do not like it when I get stuck with a mean teacher Because when a person has a mean teacher they usually scream and shout at you all day. If I make a mistake they

will yell at you as if that will help you.

And you start to hate the teacher. But when somebody does something wrong it is natural for the teacher to be mean to the student and <or> [student bracketed the preceding word] yell at them.

Organization and written language fluency increased from the initial paper to this composition. This child had not returned any class or homework prior to the initiation of this study. He had made substantial gains in attitude, work and behavior.

At the commencement of this study, one girl would write rather lengthy but jumbled stories which were difficult to comprehend:

One day my mother came to school . She had some new closes When she got to school some kids were launging [laughing] at her because she had some new closes .One of the kids side [said] You look good She side I do He said Yes She said you said you look good too .I no 'Would you like to go to the class now She said yes .Do you won't to go out . she said when He said afrer [after] school OK Good By I will see you afrer school OK So she went in her classroom And did her work So she saw him with another girl And she went over their and slap him and said you better not do that no more So she went home

It is very difficult to ascertain whether the child was speaking about herself or her mother. Her grammar at this point was very poor.

At the close of the study she described how she felt about teachers:

> I don't like teachers that much. But, some teachers are nice to me. And, some are not. But, I like the teachers that like me. If they don't like it [me], it doesn't make me proud. I don't like teachers because they don't like how we dress.

Grammar had improved as well as the internal logic of this child's ideas as shown in her writing.

Because of possible behavioral and academic gains, this program is being continued with these students.

Conclusions

From the results of this study, it can be inferred that using a word processor to enhance the writing skills of alternative education students may produce salutary effects on writing and behavior.

The number of words per composition increased the most (see Appendix I). Children composed at their computer stations. Assignments were no longer too difficult to do.

The students assisted each other with ideas for writing. The teacher did not instruct them to do so.

The monitor with its clear text display made each student's work visible to their classmates and teacher. This visibility increased social interaction during the writing assignment. Hawisher (1989) states that using a word processor removes the isolation that a writing activity may impose. In addition, Tone and Winchester (1988) believe

that social interaction on writing tasks aids in the development of language skills.

The first and final dictation samples showed slight improvement in spelling (see Appendices C and D). In terms of capitalization, one can ascertain that a few children did not remember that a proper name, e.g., "Tab," required that it must begin with a capital letter.

When assigned exercises that directly dealt with capitalization, the majority of students achieved mastery. The concept of when to capitalize did not wholly transfer to the students' creative writing. Perhaps the rules for capitalization needed to be reiterated before each writing task was commenced. In particular cases, it may be necessary to individually tutor children on capitalization concepts.

Grammar showed scant improvement. These students were deficient in rudimentary writing skills. A three month implementation period may have been insufficient time to provide the writing practice that these students required in order for them to master the necessary grammar essentials.

In general, the students were able to write for an audience, i.e., consider any expectations and questions that audience members might have concerning student written work. The aforementioned is cited by Englert and Raphael (1988) as a very important writing standard. This standard is also noted on the informal checklist (see Appendix B).

Improved student behavior and attitudes were evidenced. The children were asked what they thought about their

ability to write. They stated that they were able to produce finer quality written work than prior to using the word processor. They also indicated that they believed that they exercised greater control over their written output. In conclusion, they thought more highly of themselves.

Therefore, it would appear that the word processing activity and the concomitant activities in writing and language which accompanied it generated a positive outcome.

Recommendations

It is recommended that :

1. When selecting a word processor to use with students, choose the one that has the simplest menu and command functions. For example, "CONTROL" and "P" to Print.
2. The teacher needs to provide each student with individualized tutoring in basic English language skills in order to help them overcome this dearth of learning.

Dissemination

The methods formulated in this study are being used with nonalternative education third graders at another school. It is also being used with alternative education students at the originating school.

A copy of this report was given to the practicum verifier, the assistant principal of this school. She found the results worthy of further investigation.

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APPENDIX A

DICTATED PARAGRAPH

DICTATED PARAGRAPH

Pam has a cat named Tab. He can wag and wag. Does Tab like milk? Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can wear Pam's hat and chase a fat rat.

APPENDIX B

CHECKLIST FOR INFORMAL EVALUATION OF WRITING

CHECKLIST FOR INFORMAL EVALUATION OF WRITING

	Yes	Some-Times	No
1. Sentences express his or her ideas.	___	_____	___
2. Ideas flow from one sentence to another.	___	_____	___
(Purpose and Audience:)			
3. Understands purpose for an audience when writing.	___	_____	___
4. Purpose of the composition influences the writing.	___	_____	___
(Organizing Ideas - Paragraphs:)			
5. Groups and classifies related ideas.	___	_____	___
6. Selects main idea.	___	_____	___
7. Supports main idea with supporting details.	___	_____	___
(Organizing Ideas-Longer Compositions:)			
8. Narrows subject to one that can be covered.	___	_____	___
9. Gathers ideas before writing.	___	_____	___
10. Organizes ideas into logical sequence.	___	_____	___
11. Uses main ideas, details to write.	___	_____	___
(Rewriting:)			
12. Responds to teacher questions and makes changes.	___	_____	___
13. Reads composition silently and makes changes.	___	_____	___
(Vocabulary:)			
14. Has extensive writing vocabulary.	___	_____	___
15. Uses few slang expressions in writing.	___	_____	___
16. Does not rely on trite expressions.	___	_____	___

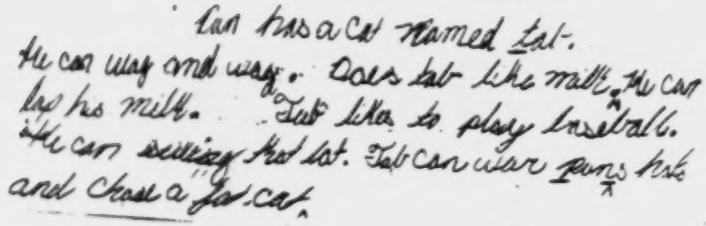
(Adapted from Norton, 1985, p. 268)

APPENDIX C

FIRST DICTATION

SUBJECTS D,J AND K

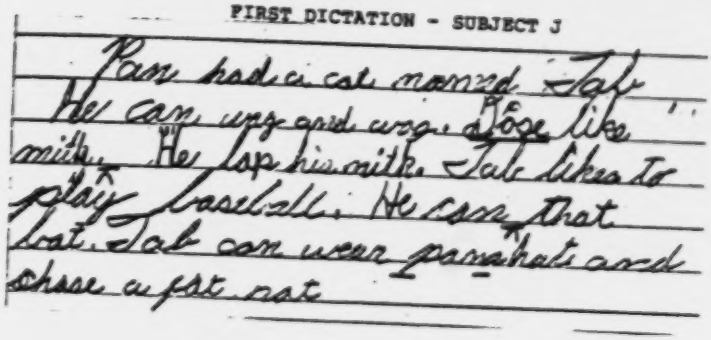
FIRST DICTATION - SUBJECT D



TITLE:TAB

Pam has a cat name tab. He can wag and wag. Does tab like milk? He can lap his milk. Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can wear Pam's hat and chase a fat rat.

FIRST DICTATION - SUBJECT J



TITLE:TAB

Pam has a cat named Tab. He can wag and wag. Does Tab like milk? He can lap his milk. Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can wear Pam's hat and chase a fat rat.

FIRST DICTATION - SUBJECT K

Subject: English
Object: Take Dictation
Story: Tab, the Cat

Pam has a cat named tab. he can wag and wag. Does tab like milk. He can lap his milk. He likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can wear Pams hat an chase a fat rat.

Tab

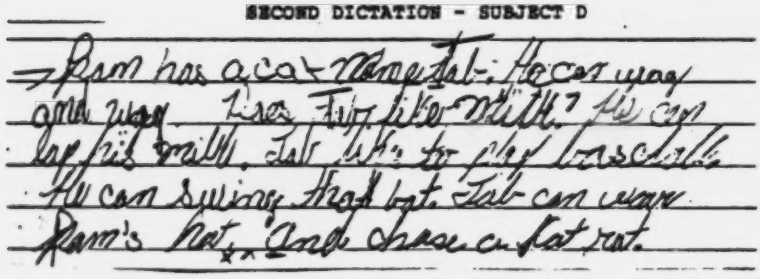
Pam has a cat named Tab. He can wag and wag . Does Tab like milk. He can lap his milk. Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can ~~wear~~ Pams hat and chase a fat rat.

APPENDIX D

FINAL DICTATION

SUBJECTS D, J AND K

SECOND DICTATION - SUBJECT D



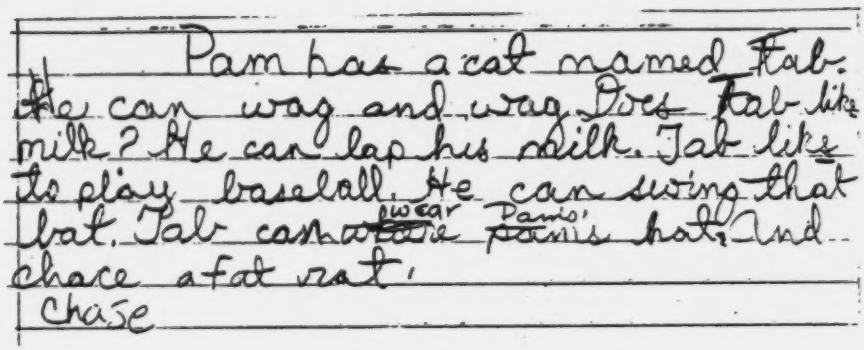
Pam has a cat named tab. He can wag and wag. Does tab like milk? He can lap his milk. Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can wears pam's hat and can chase a fat rat.

SECOND DICTATION - SUBJECT J

TITLE:SECOND DICTATION

Pam has a cat named tab. He came wag and wag. Dose tab like milk? He can lap his milk. Tab like to play baseball. he can swig that bat. Tab can were Pam's hat and chase a fat rat

SECOND DICTATION - SUBJECT K


Pam has a cat named Tab.
He can wag and wag. Does Tab like
milk? He can lap his milk. Tab likes
to play baseball. He can swing that
bat. Tab can wear Pam's hat. And
chase a fat rat.
Chase

Pam has a cat named Tab.He can wag and wag. Does Tab like milk? He can lap his milk.Tab likes to play baseball. He can swing that bat. Tab can where Pam"s hat and case a fat rat.

APPENDIX E

LETTER OF PERMISSION

TO

USE INFORMAL CHECKLIST

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APPENDIX F

KEY TO SYMBOLS

DENOTING WRITING ERRORS

KEY

(^) - Words or punctuation marks are missing.

(-) - Misspelled words.

(x) - Words, letters, or punctuation marks should be omitted.

APPENDIX G

WRITING SAMPLES

FIRST 4 WEEKS

High Achiever - Student A

Too much indenting

THE DAY MY MOM CAME TO SCHOOL

When my mom came to school Mrs.R. said that I was the best student in her class. My mom was very proud of me because I was very good for Mrs.R. , and helped her when she needed it. That was the only reason why my mom came to school.

My mom loves it when I am good because she takes me wherever she goes. I love being the only child because I get whatever I want.

Medium Achiever - Student K

TITLE THE DAY MY MOM CAME TO SCHOOL

indent
Once my Mom came to School to see what I have been doing. In class and why the teacher called my home. That day I was very upset and angery, mom was to. But I learn from my mistakes. A i regret it all now, I try to stay out of trouble.

Low Achiever - Student D

THE DAY MY MOM CAME TO SCHOOL

My mom was scared to go in the class. She was scared of the teacher. She was unhappy. Then she was happy.

APPENDIX H

WRITING SAMPLES

SECOND 4 WEEKS

High Achiever - Student A

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

I want to be very successful in life. I want to be a lawyer when I grow up, but how could I be a lawyer if I conutine be bad in school and talk back to growups. I have to be the best or they will not want me. I may pass the test but people will not come to me to help them with there problems. They don't want a rude person they want someone who understands there problems.

I want to be a general practice lawyer. I want to be a professional lawyer. I think if I try and you try we can be whatever we want.

Medium Achiever - Student K

Student Title:Success or Failure

I do not want to be a failure when I grow up. When I grow up I want to be a success and learn a lot .I will not waste my time doing nothing,I will try to learn all I can. And I will be the best I can be when I grow up.

To be a success I will need to show a lot of improvement in myself and to my teacher and also to my Mom. When I grow up I want to go in the army and be somebody.

Low Achiever - Student D

TITLE: SUCCESS OR FAILURE

I want to be success because I want to be a football player. I want to be a successful man.

APPENDIX I

WRITING SAMPLES

THIRD 4 WEEKS

High Achiever - Student A

WHAT BOTHERS ME ! ⇔ center title

What bothers me the most is when my mom spends most of her time with her boyfriend. I have nothing to do or play with someone, so I ask her if I could go play with one of my cousin's or my friend sometimes she say yes. I have no sister's nor brother's to talk with. I wish she took me with her more often I mostly see the same people every day. My grandmother think's that she is not treating me fairly I guess she think's I should get more attention since I came out of her. I think I am going to stay with my other grandmother. I would be able to have someone home to help me and spend time with me. My mother sometimes tell me I am getting beside myself it's because I sometimes feel like I can take care of my own self. I sometimes cause a lot of trouble that's why I want to leave from there and go away for a while. I love my mom a lot but sometimes I think she does not love me any more, but I know she does.

I sometimes come to school and hit on Mrs. H for no reason I just want someone to have fun with every once and a while, but she thinks I am on crack or angeldust but I am not. I just want a little attention. I hope I don't get in trouble for just wanting attention. I will try to be good with out missing with Mrs. H.

Medium Achiever - Student K

Title:What Bothers me!

Things that bother me are- sometimes I let things get in my way and I get distracted. Sometimes the teacher call my house and say things that are not true. Other things that some people say hurt my feelings and make jokes about me.

Sometimes I get bad luck. Different things happen to me. When people lie about me and it don"t
true. ? missing words

Low Achiever - Student D

TITLE: WHAT BOTHERS ME

What bothers me is when MRS calls my house and I am sacred. And when I go home, I get in trouble, and I get a punishment and I stay in my room for four days.
I feel lonely and sad when I stay in my room.